

FOR THE IMMORTAL

Emily Hauser

ώς οἵ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἔκτορος· ἥλθε δ' Αμαζόν,
Ἄρηος θυγάτηρ μεγαλήτορος ἀνδροφόνοιο...

And so they buried Hector; and then came the Amazon,
the daughter of Ares, the great-hearted man-slayer...

Iliad 24, lines 804f.
According to an early manuscript of Homer's *Iliad*

PROLOGUE

The sky above Delphi is dark. All is quiet. The birds do not yet sing in this sacred place. The only movement is a torch bobbing like a firefly through the darkened underbrush, as a man walks the winding path to the slopes of Mount Parnassus where the oracle of the gods has her home. Here, in the fissure of rock where the gods' prophet dwells, is where boundaries blur; where the division between mortal and immortal is broken, rent in two like a cut veil, and the words of the gods blow through the rift to men. Here all is slanted, strange. A mortal woman speaks the divine tongue. Steam, rancorous and bitter, billows up from the Underworld, breaking through cracks in the earth itself. And a cave, where a lone priestess crouches muttering over the holy smoke, will become the greatest sanctuary in all the world, summoning pilgrims from across the earth, commanding gifts of gold and marble monuments to the prophet. In years to come, kings will crawl on their knees to hear the gods' commands, build their fates on the words of a mad priestess, and empires rise and fall to the will of the divine.

Here, in the crucible of the gods, destiny itself will be forged.

And the first prophecy is about to be made.

The figure emerges from the wooded path, his torch's light sweeping the cavern into a gash of darkness, his boots trampling the sage-sprigs scattered on the ground. He crouches to enter into the darkness of the cave, his eyes smarting and nostrils burning at the sulphurous smoke which fills it, and as his vision adjusts he sees her: a woman hunched over the embers of a fire, her hair loose over her shoulders, her eyes wide, unblinking as she stares at him.

'You have come, then,' is all she says, and her voice is thick, as if it is a long time since she has spoken.

'You are Pythia?' he asks.

'And you are Alcides.' It is not a question.

He hesitates, thrown off by her confidence, then masters himself. 'I am Alcides, son of Zeus and Alcmene, descendant of Alcaeus.'

'And,' she says, leaning towards him over the embers, 'you have something to ask of me.'

He does not answer, but props his torch against the rock where it turns the smoke drifting through the cavern into streams of orange-gold, and kneels before her. 'Yes.'

She pauses, apparently waiting, before saying, 'Then you had better ask it.' She pokes at the ash with a stick. 'You have travelled far from Thebes to do so.'

He swallows, and uncertainty crosses his face, making him seem much younger all of a sudden: a boy, asking where he belongs. Wanting to know why he is here. Why his father did not want him.

'I want to know,' he says, his voice louder than usual, 'how I may join the gods.'

The priestess takes a deep shuddering breath, a gasp that rattles through the cavern, extinguishing the torch so that the only light is the red glow of the embers. Smoke begins to swirl thick around her, and her eyes roll back in her head, white veined with scarlet.

'Pythia?' The man starts forward as if to reach for her, but her voice snaps him back, low, harsh, resounding through the darkness as if the spirits of the Underworld are grating an echo to her words in the caverns of Tartarus beneath:

'Destined by Zeus to rule the race of the heroes of Greece,

*son of a god and leader of men; yet the anger of Hera
stands in your way – and she, unappeased, shall cause you to fail.
Zeus betrayed her, his wife, years before when he lay with Alcmene
and begot you, a falseness and grief to the queen of the gods.
Hera rages at you and all that you are; the proof and the object
of her envy.'*

*She takes a rasping breath, ribs shuddering, her head lolling on her neck, as if the force of the
gods that ploughs through her is too much for her mortal frame.*

*'If to appease her still is your wish and
you seek to dwell on Olympus, hear my warning and heed it
well. Twelve labours must you perform; twelve perilous tasks as
no man before nor after shall do, with fierce beasts to slay and
lions to tame, then birds of bronze beaks and fire-breathing bulls,
such as befit the first and greatest hero of Greece.*

*For Eurystheus, king of Tiryns, shall you perform these
and with his sons and daughter for ten years shall live till the tasks are
done.*

*'Two fates therefore stand before you; two paths towards the
end of death which you alone can choose. If you leave and
take on the labours, never again shall you see your home Thebes, but
Zeus has sworn by his decree you shall become a god, and*

*mortals across the earth for eternity shall worship you,
son of a god with glory undying; and Hera has ruled that,
if you complete them, she shall accept you, and you shall be known as
Hercules.*

*'But, if you fail, or the labours reject, then
she will ensure you nameless shall vanish, unsung and obscure, un-
known and unspoken, immortal no more.'*

She falls silent, slumped forwards, her chin on her chest; the eery light ebbs, the echoes of Tartarus are still, and the cavern is dark once more. The man who will be known as Hercules watches her, waiting for more.

'I have a choice?' he says at once, when she raises her head, her eyes blurred in the blackness and smoke. A scowl darkens his features. 'I came to you, priestess, for answers. I came to know my destiny, to learn the dictates of the Fates, to know what I should do.'

'That depends on what you want.'

*He leans towards her, the answer coming quick as a breath of wind skimming over water.
'Immortality.'*

She considers him for a moment, and the sulphur smoke drifts between them: the prophetess, weak, her breathing slurred; her gaze fixed on the man, eager, desperate, fervent.

'Then it seems, son of Zeus, you have made your choice already.'

On Mount Olympus, one of the Muses stirs from her seat within the Hall of the Fates. Concealed behind a pillar at the colonnade's edge so she may see and not be seen, her knees tucked into her

chest, she has been keeping vigil through the night, gazing through the open portico which affords a view on the peoples of earth. The rosy fingertips of dawn are creeping over the horizon, bathing the land below in soft light and shading the birds flying across the shore into ink-like blots. To the mortals in their dwellings in the valleys, as they wake and prepare to cut their meadows with the scythe or pluck the grapes from the vines, it is simply another new day; but in the shadows of the night, an age has passed. A new era has begun. The Muse gets to her feet, draws her cloak around her and pulls her hood to shield her face.

At last, it is time.

She walks, her footsteps hushed and her figure shadowed in the near-darkness, towards an alcove hidden in the far corner where, when she slides back the screen painted to resemble the marble that surrounds it, a cedar chest is revealed, dark-stained with age and fitted with a bronze lock. The hall is lit only by a few oil-lamps which are guttering to the very ends of their wicks, but Calliope, eldest of the Muses, does not need light to find her way. She looks around her, eyes flicking back and forth between each of the scroll-laden shelves and the desks littered with papyrus and ink-stands, searching for intruders, for spies; but the hall is empty, and there are no shadows nor whispers to warn her she is being watched. She draws a key from the folds of her cloak and fits it with ease into the lock. There is a moment's silence, and then a click. The lid swings open.

And there they are: the three golden apples she and Hermes stole, all those years ago, when Hera and Zeus were newly wed and the earth-goddess herself fashioned an apple tree of molten gold to bless the marriage. For a moment, as the scent of cedar mixed with centuries of dust washes over her, she allows herself to be transported in memory. She remembers how, at Zeus and Hera's wedding-feast when the gods were deep in their cups, she had whispered to

Hermes, god of thieving, what she wanted to do; how, together, as night drew its dark veil over the banqueting hall, they had crept to the golden-apple tree and, as Hermes kept watch, she had plucked its fruit. She smiles to think how the earth beneath them had quivered and shaken at their perfidy, and they had run together over the heaving ground, three apples clutched to her chest; how next day, climbing from her marriage-bed and setting the oak-crown on her locks for the first time, Hera had discovered the apples were missing and had raged at her loss, though she knew not who had stolen them. How she had set the three daughters of Atlas to guard the tree, one for each of the apples lost, and placed it in a garden at the world's very end, so that none would be able to steal from the queen of the gods again.

Calliope traces the curves of the apples' skin with the tip of her forefinger, one by one, as a mother would caress the cheek of her newborn child. Three spheres, smooth and round and gleaming in the low light of the lamps, their stalks like golden filaments, their surfaces polished, unbroken. Each side by side within the box, encircled with engraved patterns of gold carved into the wood itself.

Three, she thinks.

One for each of them.

She glances over her shoulder, bright-eyed; knowing, as her gaze falls on the familiar shelves and writing-implements that, after what she is about to do, she may never see Olympus again.

Knowing that she is risking everything on the greatest gamble she will ever take.

With a single breath, she snaps the coffer shut and tucks it under one arm. Turning to walk across the hall, her pace quickening now, her cape flying out behind her, she thinks only of where she will hide herself and her three prizes until the time is right. She needs to be at hand,

among the mortals, to wait to spring at the appropriate time and not a moment later. It will be a delicate balance, to remain hidden from Hera, and yet to hold back until the correct point, until she is absolutely sure – and her choice of hiding-place will be of utmost importance. There are many places for concealment within the mortal world; but she has planned for this day for thousands of years, purposeful and resolute as the Muse of epic should be, and she has already made her decision. She will go to the vast forests at the world's very edge, where the eagles soar, alone, brushing the tree-tops with their wings.

A moment later and she reaches the colonnade again at the edge of Olympus, and the expanse of sky that stretches from the mountain's brink to the horizon. She closes her eyes for a moment, standing between two lofty columns with the rock falling steeply away beneath her, to feel the warmth of the sun upon her face: the first light of a new age.

The last time she may ever see the sun from Olympus' peak.

She clutches the casket more tightly to her chest.

And then she sweeps her cloak around her and leaps, graceful as a swallow, into the emptiness of the morning air.

The age of the heroes has begun.

AMAZON

*Hippolyta had a war-belt, a symbol of her prowess
above all the other Amazons; and Hercules was sent to fetch it,
because Admete, daughter of Eurystheus, desired it.*

Apollodorus *Library* 2.5.9

Fifteen years before the Trojan War



Hippolyta

Amazons, Land of the Saka

The Thirty-Ninth Day after the Day of Storms in the Season of Tar, 1265 BC

The frost bit at my lips and stung my eyes as I vaulted onto the back of my horse Kati, heart pounding hard with the mixed fear and blood-lust that was my inheritance, and my duty.

‘*Go, go!*’ I shouted, kicking at her flanks and pulling at the reins. She reared, her breath pouring from her nostrils like smoke, her eyes white as the first riders galloped towards our camp, kicking up clouds of snow from their hooves, screaming battle cries.

‘*Melanippe!*’ I shouted out, and I circled Melanippe’s tent, ice-crystals forming on my eyelashes. ‘*Melanippe!*’

She emerged, tying her war-belt around her waist and carrying two spears. She tossed one to me, and I caught it left-handed and thrust it into the baldric over my back. ‘*Budini?*’ she asked, glancing at the rust-red hair beneath the riders’ stiff caps.

I nodded. ‘They must know Orithyia has taken our troops to Hialea. They mean us to surrender without a battle, else they would not keep their distance.’

She snorted. ‘Without a battle? Then they do not know the Amazons.’ She vaulted onto the back of her horse, a high-necked black with a white mark upon his forehead. She was about to ride out when I reached forwards and placed my hand upon her arm, my gaze searching her face. ‘The children – Teuspa remains to protect them, as before?’

Her eyes rested briefly upon mine. ‘Teuspa stays, along with his guard.’

I nodded my approval, and her horse kicked up a flurry of powdered snow as she galloped off towards the other tents. I pulled Kati around and circled back, eyes scanning the camp, picking out the figure of the councillor Agar; Ioxeia, the aged and skilful priest of the tribe, wearing her wolf-pelt over her shoulders; Toxis, tightening her war-belt and fastening her daughter Polemusa's baldric, readying herself for battle. Many of the Amazons were already throwing felt rugs over their horses' backs and mounting, leather boots crusted with snow, iron daggers glinting in the low evening light, bows and quivers hanging from their belts, shields slung over their shoulders on straps. Though the wind was howling across the plain, slicing at the exposed skin on my face and whistling in my ears so that I could hardly hear the cries of the invaders, I rode out before all my warriors, determined to give them a sight of their queen before we joined battle. They brought their horses into line as I passed, the band of my twelve finest warrior-women first, then the young girls just ripening to womanhood, Polemusa among them; men with greying beards flecked with snow and boys with the slim limbs of youth. They all bowed their heads to their horses' necks, and my deer-hide cloak flew behind me as I rode, nodding to each of them in turn, my throat tight and my breathing sharp as it always was before battle. I reached the end of the line and held my bow to the lowering skies, the general of this ice-hardened army.

'*Oiorpata!*' I cried.

'*Oiorpata!*' The Amazons returned the *uran*, the battle-cry.

Melanippe rode forwards, hooves kicking up snow, and I nodded to her, once. At my signal, my warrior-guard peeled off from the rest of the troops, their horses cantering behind Melanippe away through the camp smooth as ripples on water, shields bouncing against their backs.

‘*Oiorpata!*’ I cried again to the rest of the warriors, and I wheeled around and then began to gallop towards the camp’s edge where the Budini were still circling, whirling their pointed bronze *sagaris* axes around their heads and yelling their cries of battle. I urged my horse on, head bent against the wind, and behind me I heard the beat of two hundred hooves against the snow and the swish of arrows past my ears as the Amazons sent a deadly hail upon the invaders. I let go of the reins, guiding Kati only with my knees as my mother had taught me when I was young, and Kati a spindle-legged foal. I drew four red-striped shafts from my quiver and set them to my bow; drew back the string with my thumb and fired the first, then the second, third and fourth in rapid succession as I galloped on, easeful as a sharp-keeled ship cutting through the waves. I saw each hit their target, three Budini warriors toppling from their mounts into the snowdrift with a dull *thud* and a scream of pain, and gritted my teeth; the fourth clutched at his arm as blood poured through his tunic and spread upon the ground with a dark red stain.

Ahead, the Budini re-grouped, falling back into a single mass of armoured warriors, pointed *sagaris* held weighted in their hands, horses stamping nervously at the ground. I smiled grimly and drew my spear to my shoulder as I wheeled around, other hand resting upon Kati’s neck, and hurled it, straight and graceful as a flying bird. There was a shriek of agony and a *thump* as a Budini slumped forwards, the spear shaft buried in his chest; his horse bucked and reared and he slid off into the snow, legs stuck out beneath him. The Budini howled and raised their battle-axes and hammered them upon their shields, then began to charge towards us, yelling and whirling their *sagaris* around and around their heads.

It was time – the hammering of my heart in my chest was telling me so. Melanippe and my guard would have reached the riverbank by now...

And so it was time for the Budini to see why we were the most skilled warriors among the people of the Saka.

‘Retreat!’ I cried. ‘Retreat!’

I barely touched the reins for Kati to turn, and around me the masses of Amazon troops were wheeling back, stamping down the snow, manes flying out in the wind as we galloped faster than circling birds, racing back away from the camp towards the frozen expanse of the Silis river and the hunched snow-covered trees. Behind us the Budini whooped and hissed and clattered their battle-axes upon their shields. I glanced over my shoulder, saw them following us, shrieking, teeth white in the gathering dusk. *Only a moment longer*, I told myself as my hips thudded into my horse’s back and the glimmer of the campfires retreated into the darkness. *It has to be a moment longer...*

And then we were upon the snow-laden skeletons of the trees, and Melanippe and my warrior-guard were screeching out of the cover at the Budini’s left flank, bows raised, hailing arrows and glittering with iron...

‘Now!’

It was the fire of my anger that guided me as I turned upon the seat of my horse, drew my bow and, with the ferocity of a wolf-mother protecting her cubs, flung five arrows, one upon another, upon the unsuspecting Budini. The twang of bowstrings around me and the darts slicing through the air told me the others of my warriors had done the same. Cries and screams of agony from the Budini, trapped between the frozen river-ice and the looming trees, wailed towards us upon the wind, but I shut my ears to them and drew again, determined not to lose sight of the tents in the distance through the storm of snow whipped up by our horses’ hooves and the shrieking winds of the plains.

‘Again!’ My cry whipped past my warriors, and once more I sent my arrows hissing towards the enemy who had dared to attack my people, until the howls of injured Budini pierced the air like the shrieks of eagles on the hunt.

‘Now – around!’ I called. I pulled on the reins to bring Kati around to the right and lowered my head, urging her on, and around me the Amazons were wheeling back towards the camp, horses stamping and snorting, arrow after arrow slicing through the winter air in a cloud of bronze and iron. And then I felt a sudden stab of horror in my stomach as the blizzard parted for a moment to reveal, dimly through the snow-storm, a group of Budini who had separated from the main force, attacking the tents, looting as much as they could lay their hands on and cutting free the horses we had left behind...

‘No!’

I leant forwards, my throat tight, my heart pounding against my ribs, and with all the training born of a lifetime spent riding upon the plains together I urged Kati on, feeling the sweat of her skin slippery beneath my hands, and behind me the Amazons were galloping so hard and fast that the earth shuddered beneath us. Still I pushed Kati harder, the breath screaming in my lungs, her flanks heaving beneath me – my whole body focused on reaching my camp, my home, my people...

There were eight or ten Budini, fighting hand to hand with the guard I had left behind, though I could not make out Teuspa among them. One by one, as I came nearer, the intruders spotted us approaching, and I could see them vaulting back onto their horses, calling out to each other to flee. My arrows sliced at the air, rage and fury so powerful within me that I felt as if I were a beacon of fire blazing to the heavens; my heart was burning, and I longed for nothing but to keep them away, forever, as long as I lived. But as Kati stormed into the camp, ploughing up a

wave of snow before her and billowing steam into the air, the last of them were already beginning to gallop away towards the frosted flat surface of the river to the north, following the retreating remainders of their army, five looted horses held by the reins and cantering beside them. I let out a yell of frustration and buried my hand into my quiver, drew four arrows, and one after the other like a shower of spurting flame sent them after the intruders with all the strength I had; but the blurring clouds of snow and the growing darkness creeping over the horizon obscured my vision and my arrows plunged into the snow, sending up flurries of white crystals.

I slapped my hand, hard, against my thigh, the corners of my eyes encrusted with ice.

Melanippe rode up beside me. ‘They are gone, sister. They’re gone.’

I ignored her, tugging at the reins to bring Kati around and leaping down into the snow, pushing my way through to the nearest dwelling.

‘Teres?’ I cried out, my voice shaking. ‘Ainippe?’

Two children, not yet ten years of age, peered out through the tent’s flap, their heads shrouded with fur caps, their dark eyes round. I let out a breath that misted the air before me and ran on through the camp, determined to see with my own eyes all those who had stayed behind. I checked each of the tents where I knew a child dwelt, and clasped them tight to me as one by one I found them safe; watched, my heart rent with pain and relief, as snow-sodden mothers embraced their children, and ordered Ioxeia to tend to those of the warriors who had been wounded. At last I reached Melanippe’s tent, a patchwork of felt and deer-hides.

‘Teuspa?’ I called.

There was a moment of silence. Then Melanippe’s husband emerged from the tent, one hand covered in dark blood.

I felt the breath catch in my chest.

'Cayster,' was all he said.